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ABSTRACT

The role of state government in improving the quality of undergraduate education and the impact of related state actions on colleges are discussed. The background of state interest in quality is reviewed. Four forces accounting for state interest in the quality of higher education are identified: a spillover from concern about quality in elementary/secondary education, links between higher education and state economic growth, performance audits, and the link between quality improvement and allocation of scarce resources. State approaches to quality improvement are considered, including: statewide planning focusing on quality, blue ribbon commissions/task forces, program review and approval, resource allocation policies, faculty improvement, remedial education, admission standards, articulation agreements, and assessment/testing. A framework of the state's role and institutional impacts in improving postsecondary education quality identifies major groups that play important roles, including state officials, the state higher education agency, accrediting agencies, and colleges. The framework also considers the state policy arena, state coordination of quality improvement efforts, institutional impacts, and state system impacts. (SW)

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THE STATE'S ROLE AND IMPACT IN IMPROVING QUALITY IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION: A PERSPECTIVE AND FRAMEWORK

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OVERVIEW

Improving the quality of undergraduate education has become a primary concern of and driving force behind many institutional, state, and national initiatives in the mid-late 1980s. The focus of this paper is on the particular role state government has played and is playing and on the impact of related state actions on institutions of higher education. The extent of state involvement was identified in a recent Education Commission of the States survey that reported state initiatives to improve undergraduate education in all 50 states and the District of Columbia (Boyer & McGuinness, 1986). While the focus on "quality improvement" as a popular political issue may be a relatively recent phenomenon, there is little question that states have taken a broad array of actions directly or indirectly tied to educational quality improvement, that it is currently very much on the minds of state politicians (see the report of the Education Commission of the States, Transforming the State Role in Undergraduate Education: Time for a Different View (1986)), and that institutions view this active state interest with marked ambivalence. Based on an initial review of the literature on state level quality initiatives (see the bibliography to be provided), two things are apparent: first, the literature on the topic consists largely of critiques and proposals by study groups or interested parties, polemics or more reasoned discussions of issues, or case descriptions of programs and initiatives (usually by those who have initiated or implemented them); and second, there is little or no research on the efficacy or impact of such state level activity. There also appear to be relatively few individuals actively engaged in collecting information systematically or doing research related to this arena.

Given the importance of the phenomenon and the nature of the literature and research, this paper is designed as a background for a meeting of individuals and/or agencies who have a common interest in understanding the many dimensions of state level efforts to improve undergraduate quality, to begin preliminary discussions of our knowledge base and gaps, and to identify ways we might share data collection, policy analysis, and research efforts to fill those gaps.

This paper is not intended to be a thorough synthesis of the literature, but rather a preliminary framework which identifies the arena in order to facilitate discussion. Before presenting the framework, we briefly discuss the emergence of state level interest in quality (like conservation, it is not a new issue); some current definitions of what quality seems to mean to state officials; some interpretations of the implicit and explicit purposes, intentions and/or rationales that suggest why state officials view quality improvement efforts as important or timely; and some examples of how states are using different mechanisms to promote quality improvement.

BACKGROUND OF STATE INTEREST IN QUALITY

The early state role with respect to higher education was largely exercised through a relatively limited set of relationships: states provided the legal context within which institutions, both public and private, were licensed or chartered; usually public sector trustees or regents were appointed by the governor; and annually or biennially public sector (and in some states, private sector) institutions received state tax dollars for operating and capital expenses. Except for occasional pieces of

legislation applying to specific institutions, most state concerns for higher education were expressed through the budgetary process.

This state budget process was, at least up until World War II, a fairly primitive one in most states, partaking more of what Wildavsky (1984) has termed incremental tradeoffs in a political bargaining mode than of any heavily scientific method driven by state goals of quality enhancement. While quality concerns were frequently part of the rhetoric, operationally they were not part of an explicit state policy process.

With the massive expansion of post-war higher education, however, states found themselves spending vastly larger sums on their universities and colleges and, in addition, facing much more complex issues about which institutions, existing or new, should get which kinds and levels of academic programs. To aid them in sorting out the budget fights and the role and mission issues, over 30 state governments during the 1950s or 1960s established some form of statewide board of higher education. These boards worked to try to achieve "orderly growth and development" of higher education by developing budget systems appropriate to higher education, long-range planning stressing diversity and articulation, and program and capital outlay review systems to implement the planning goals.

Thus, the state role broadened from a basically legal and financial relationship with public universities and colleges to an agenda which could include everything from planning to create new institutions, determining the role and mission for new and existing institutions, approving their buildings and academic programs, agreeing to such operating items as student admission standards, tuition charges and faculty salary scales to appropriating the tax dollars to drive the whole system.

Nor were private institutions exempt from this larger state role. In many states private sector institutions were included in state planning activities and state student aid programs; in a few states private institutions either by law (New York) or by voluntary practice (e.g., Minnesota, Maryland) participated in state program review activities; and private institutions were often concerned with state policies having impact on the competitiveness of public sector institutions.

The budgeting systems developed for higher education varied from state to state but more often than not included elements of formula budgeting which relied heavily on analysis of inputs: students, faculty, classroom space, etc. While later efforts to employ PPBS did try to pay some attention to the estimated benefits of proposed outputs (and thus to quality considerations), such efforts were not successful and it is safe to say that most state budgeting for higher education did not address quality issues in any serious fashion.

While considerations of quality did constitute part of the program review process (along with such other factors as state need, compatibility with institutional role and mission, unnecessary duplication, and state ability to fund), such quality considerations were also generally judged on the basis of input elements (e.g., how many faculty had the terminal degree; how many volumes in the library; average SAT scores of students; etc.) rather than on any efforts to assess outputs.

States could, of course, and did to some extent rely on accrediting agencies for assurances on issues of program and institutional quality--but it became widely recognized that most accreditation judgments were also being rendered on the basis of input factors.

Thus, while there were frequent references to pursuit of enhanced quality in many state planning documents during the 1960s and 1970s, the budgeting, program review and accreditation processes being employed did not take one very far down the road of defining and measuring that elusive term.

THE NATURE OF STATE INTEREST IN QUALITY

What happened at the state level in the 1980s to transform what had been a real but largely rhetorical interest in the quality of higher education into a series of state programs summarized in the following section, some mandating certain assessment activities and some offering financial incentives, but all explicitly targeted at the improvement of quality?

The forces causing social change are usually diverse; in this case one can identify at least four major ones:

1. A spillover to higher education was evident from the huge wave of concern about quality in elementary/secondary education following the publication of the report A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The quality of education offered in our elementary and secondary schools had clearly diminished over the years and something had to be done. States took control and undertook numerous initiatives to improve the quality of education in those schools. Having met with success there, they naturally turned their attention to higher education. It soon became politically popular to be known as an "education governor."

2. The links between higher education and state economic growth brought greater attention to the movement to improve the quality of higher education. State-level actors argued that if they improved the quality of education in their states, technology would be drawn to their states; industries would re-locate; jobs would be created; and their state economies would improve.

3. Some applications to higher education were made of a general emerging trend in state accountability patterns called performance audit, in which professional staff identify or develop program goals in different state policy areas and measures to assess their achievement.

4. The increasing insistence by state leaders that in times of state fiscal austerity increased proportions of state funds for higher education will be forthcoming only if it can be shown that quality will be improved. Moreover, state leaders were alerted by parents' alarm over the costs of sending their children to college. The costs of higher education have skyrocketed at a rate twice the rate of inflation. Because of the high price, the public needs assurance that the return on its investment merits the costs.

One must note the absence of a consensus of what is meant by "a quality education." Campaign speeches, governors' addresses, legislators' remarks, and state and national commission reports all discuss improving the quality of undergraduate education. However, one would be challenged to examine those items and extract precise definitions of quality.

One can only surmise what a quality education might be when one examines the initiatives states have undertaken to improve quality. For example, in some states where admission standards have been raised, a

quality college education is reflected in a student body with higher entrance examination scores. If in 1980, the average entrance examination score was 900, but in 1987 it is 1200, then one would deduce that quality has been improved. In a second example, quality can be demonstrated through value-added testing. Students are tested when they enter college and again when they finish. Quality is indicated by the degree to which students demonstrate that they have benefited from the college experience. No change in score would mean that students have learned nothing, and therefore, the quality of their education was inadequate. One can cite numerous examples of financial incentives to attract higher quality faculty and higher quality students to institutions as a mechanism to improve the quality of undergraduate education; certainly the quality of those entering the institutions will be higher.

Nonetheless, there are no explicit definitions of quality. Implicit in all of the activities to improve the quality of undergraduate education are these indicators of quality: faculty of high calibre, students who are well prepared for college, adequate facilities, management flexibility, and effective teaching. A quality higher education is one that is student-centered with demonstrable increased learning in an institution whose management practices facilitate and support learning activities.

STATE APPROACHES TO QUALITY IMPROVEMENT

As soon as one attempts to enumerate state approaches to improving the quality of undergraduate education--who is doing what now--the list becomes obsolete. Almost daily it seems that at some level in the state, whether it

is administrative, legislative, or executive, a new initiative is being pursued or a current initiative is being pursued in a new way.

An excellent summary of recent state initiatives to improve the quality of undergraduate education was provided by Carol M. Boyer and Aims C. McGuinness, Jr. of the Education Commission of the States (1986) [see Table 1]. This summary will briefly touch on those initiatives.

Planning. The planning of higher education is usually the responsibility of the state higher education agency (SHEA) or coordinating board. Today in numerous states, we find improving the quality of higher education to be a major focus in planning activities. Statewide plans with explicit quality enhancement features have been or are being developed in at least the following states: Alaska, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, North Dakota, Oregon, South Carolina, Utah, and Wisconsin.

Blue ribbon commissions/task forces. At least 26 states have commissioned task forces to study undergraduate education and to make recommendations on how the quality can be improved (Mangieri & Arnn, 1986). Examples of some of the states cited by Boyer and McGuinness are: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Delaware, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin; Mangieri and Arnn's list also includes Michigan and Virginia.

Program review and approval. Although as noted above, quality considerations had always played a role in program review and approval, today's program review and approval activities in most states are executed with quality as a major goal. States cited by Boyer and McGuinness include: Alabama, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma,

Table 1

Summary of Recent State Initiatives to Improve the Quality of Undergraduate Education

Initiatives	States
Admissions standards	California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota
Articulation agreements for student transfer from two- to four-year institutions	Alabama, Alaska, Colorado, Florida, South Carolina, Wyoming
Community colleges	California, Minnesota, Tennessee, Wyoming
Comprehensive studies of higher education by blue-ribbon, gubernatorial, or interim legislative committee	Arkansas, California, Colorado, Delaware, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas, Washington, Wisconsin
Core curriculum	Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Oregon
Faculty reward systems and certification	Arizona, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Washington
Graduate teaching assistants	Arizona, Kansas
High school/college transition	Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont
Institutional or systemwide reviews of undergraduate education	California, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Maine, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin
Mission redefinition and differentiation	Colorado, Idaho, Maine, Missouri, Vermont, Wisconsin
Program and institutional review	Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Washington, West Virginia, Wyoming
Program approval regulations	Connecticut, Louisiana, New Mexico, Pennsylvania
Remedial education	Arkansas, California, Florida, Indiana, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio
Resource allocation and funding mechanisms	Kentucky, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, Wisconsin
Special incentive funding for undergraduate education	Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, Ohio, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia
Statewide plan by higher education agency or board	Alaska, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, North Dakota, Oregon, South Carolina, Utah, Wisconsin
Student aid and scholarships	Massachusetts, Montana, Nebraska
Teacher education reforms	Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New York, North Carolina
Testing basic skills of entering freshmen	District of Columbia, Montana, New Jersey
Testing basic skills and competencies of college students (i.e., "rising junior" exams)	Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas
"Value-added" assessment of student outcomes	Alaska, Colorado, Missouri, New Jersey, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah

Note. From "State Initiatives to Improve Undergraduate Education: ECS Survey Highlights" by Carol M. Boyer and Aims C. McGuinness, Jr., 1986, AAHE Bulletin, 38(6), pp. 4-5.

Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

Resource allocation policies. Numerous changes are taking place in which financial resources are allocated to institutions and within institutions with the explicit goal of improving the quality of undergraduate education. Several of these are: (1) formula funding for quality, e.g., no loss of revenues for decreased enrollments (Tennessee); (2) incentive/performance funding, e.g., the Tennessee Performance Funding Project (Arizona, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, Ohio, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia); (3) excellence funding, e.g., academic scholars funds, "centers of excellence", merit scholars (Florida, Ohio, Virginia, and others); (4) grants for quality improvement (Virginia); and (5) financial deregulation and other funding mechanisms (Colorado, Kentucky, Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, and Wisconsin).

Faculty improvement. Realizing how important it is to raise the quality of faculty while raising the quality of undergraduate education, many states are attempting to raise faculty salaries and faculty standards. Included among those states are Arizona, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, and Washington.

Remedial education. Remedial education programs are starting up in colleges and universities where they had not been place prior to the reform movement; and some states are redefining the role of remedial education and where it should be offered. Some states, in the name of quality control, mandate that no credit be given for remedial work. Addressing remedial

education are states such as Arkansas, California, Florida, Indiana, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Ohio.

Admission standards. Admissions standards are being raised in numerous states and differential admissions standards are being applied to differential institutions within a state. The list of states addressing admission standards includes: California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and South Dakota.

Articulation agreements. In order to raise the quality of students entering college, articulation agreements between secondary schools and colleges and universities and between two-year and four-year institutions have been established. The list of states includes: Alabama, Alaska, Colorado, Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Vermont, and Wyoming.

Assessment/Testing. When one mentions mechanisms to improve the quality of undergraduate education, assessment is perhaps the one that appears at the top of most lists. Currently four forms predominate: (1) entry level or basic skills testing (District of Columbia, Montana, and New Jersey); (2) progress testing, e.g., rising junior exams (Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Texas); (3) exit testing (Georgia); and (4) value-added testing (Alaska, Colorado, Missouri, New Jersey, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, and Utah).

Other initiatives. Numerous other approaches to improving the quality of undergraduate education are being undertaken. Included in these are: improving the quality of graduate teaching assistants, an examination of the core curriculum, institutional or systemwide reviews of undergraduate education, mission redefinition and differentiation, student aid and scholarships, and teacher education reforms. Please see the attached Boyer and McGuinness table for listings of states involved in these approaches.

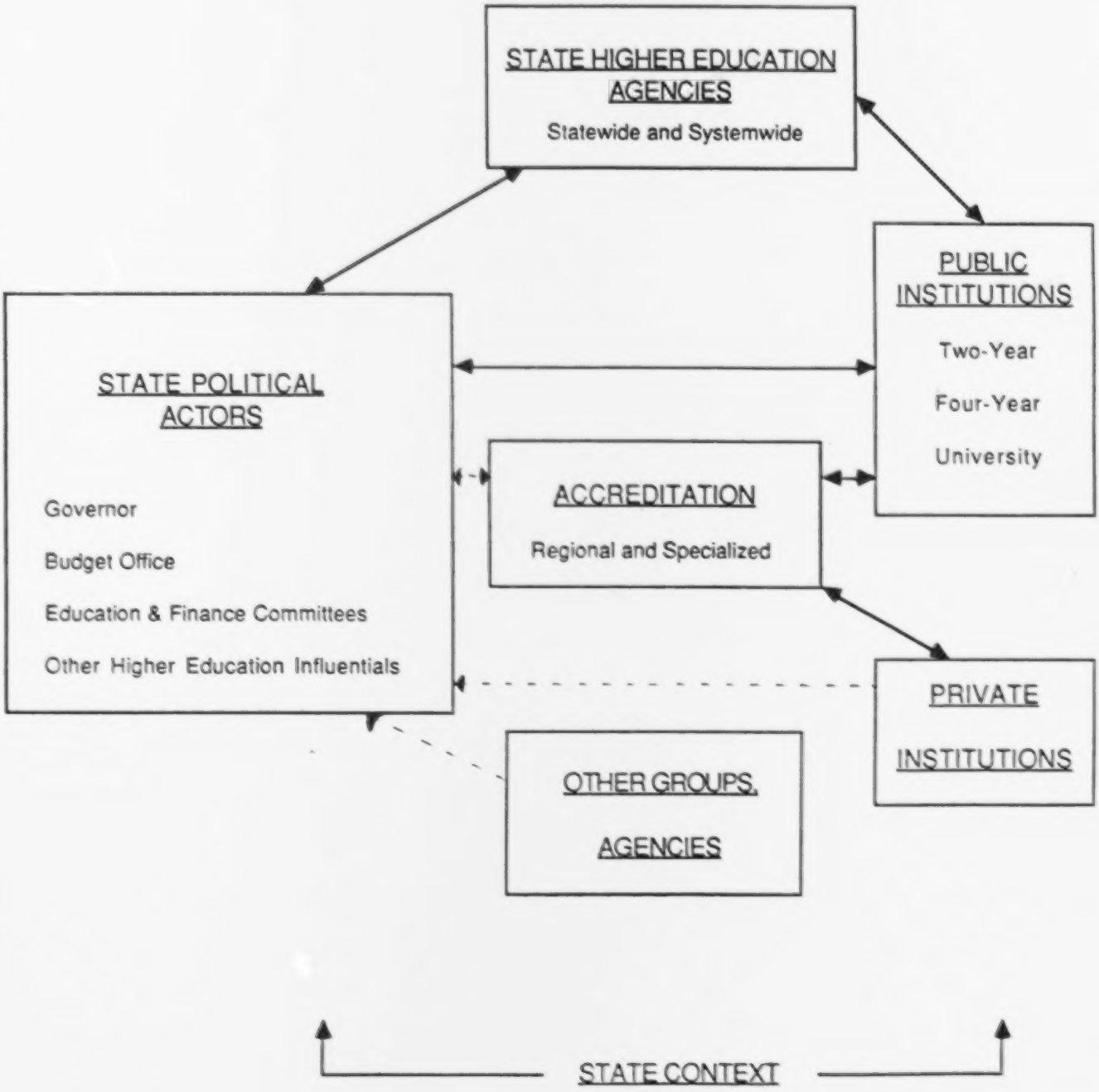
A FRAMEWORK

This framework is a preliminary attempt to sketch the boundaries--the primary actors, the linkages between states and institutions, and the major dimensions--for a group interested in understanding the state's role and institutional impacts in improving quality in undergraduate education. It is intended to be neither a detailed framework for data collection about the phenomenon nor a research design.

Figure 1 suggests that the Primary Actors fall into five major groups who play a significant role in defining the nature of a state's quality improvement effort and determining the success of its implementation. State Political Actors include the governor's office, the state budget office, legislative committees on education and finance in both houses of the legislature, and other key officials who have taken an active role in promoting the quality issue and quality improvement efforts in higher education. The State Higher Education Agency (SHEA) is used generically to refer to all state level planning, coordinating and/or governing agencies which have responsibility for all public higher education or for a major

FIGURE 1. PRIMARY ACTING GROUPS

STATE QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION



institutional segment of it. Although not a state agency, Accreditation Agencies (regional and specialized) are identified because so much of the quality improvement effort focuses on issues with which accreditation groups are also becoming increasingly involved. Institutions, of course, are the higher educational institutions which are the principal target group of most state quality improvement efforts. They are also the primary organizations in which the state level quality improvement effort is usually implemented and where the impact on undergraduate education can be observed. Other Actors includes those not directly involved with higher education but who may play an active role in state policy formulation or its delivery; e.g., quality improvements by the state board of education in K-12 education, industry groups interested in human resources or economic development, and major federal government or national organizations promoting the issue. The list of other crucial actors varies by state.

Identifying these five primary acting groups is useful since they are groups whose views and perceptions might be the focus of a data collection effort. Focusing on them also identifies major linkages (arrows in Figure 1) which suggest important interaction and influence relationships which could be the focus of major research efforts. Finally, the functions and activities of these primary actors suggest some broad areas for data collection and/or research and suggest some major dynamics/dimensions in each.

Table 2 highlights three arenas or levels of analysis which parallel the key actors and in which data collection and/or research could add to our understanding of state level efforts toward quality improvement: the state policy arena, the state coordination of quality improvement efforts, and the

TABLE 2. SOME MAJOR DIMENSIONS IN EXAMINING STATE LEVEL QUALITY IMPROVEMENTS AND IMPACTS

STATE POLICY AGENDA	STATE COORDINATION OF QUALITY EFFORTS	INSTITUTIONAL IMPACTS
A. Key State Actors: Roles & perspective	A. SHEA System Structure and Authority: WRT resources and institutional control	A. Key Actors/Targets: Roles and perceptions, Awareness
B. Purposes, Motives Rationale: Explicit & implicit	B. Purpose and Strategy: Quality focus, institutional relations, type of quality effort	B. Institutional Response Strategy Externally to state effort Internally
C. Policy Formulation Process: Participation and influence patterns	C. Type of Quality Improvement Effort: Planning Blue Ribbon Commissions Program Review Resource Allocation Faculty Improvement Remedial Education Admissions Standards Articulation Agreements Student Assessment	C. Institutional Changes: Institution-wide and in target unit Administrative and academic arena Structure, resources and process Penetration to departments, programs, faculty, and curriculum Quality improvement of target population Intended/Unintended
D. State Policy: Legislation, appropriations, others	D. Approach to Quality Improvement Effort: Breadth/focus Emphasis on mandates, managerial control incentives, models, evaluation, etc. Institutional involvement	SOME SYSTEM-WIDE IMPACTS: Access; Cost; Transfer patterns; Competition/cooperation; Responsiveness to State Needs: e.g. Economic Development, Human capital, State attractiveness

impacts of those efforts on individual institutions and on the system as a whole. Accreditation and other groups are not discussed since they represent neither official state actors nor institutions which are the primary focus. They are, however, important and influential actors in shaping state policy, higher education agency activity, and institutional response. Since the intent of the phenomenon is to improve the quality of undergraduate education, the following comments on the three arenas will focus on its importance in understanding these impacts.

State policy arena. Four broad dimensions in this arena seem important. Clearly the views that key state officials have of the meaning of quality in higher education, their perception of the current quality of higher education in their state, and their sense of the role that quality improvement plays in their larger political agenda will all be influential in the role they choose to play in encouraging quality improvement. Their purposes and motives (implicit and explicit) may be clear or vague, unified or divided, and may be shaped by many forces but may also shape the expectations for and the nature of quality improvement efforts. The policy formulation process, as the state quality issue is debated, is critical both in terms of who among the state level actors influences its direction and also from the standpoint of whether state higher education agency officials and/or institutional representatives are included--reflecting the views of those most affected by resulting policy. Clearly, legislation and appropriations directed to quality improvement efforts are shaped by the key state actors, their purposes and motives, and the policy formulation process. While they are not the only measure of a state's commitment to

quality improvement, they do provide strong signals to state agencies and to institutions of the state's seriousness about this effort.

State coordination of quality. In most states, the effort at quality improvement will be heavily influenced by the state's higher education system of governance and coordination. The structure of state agency governance and coordination, the perceptions of its key actors, both lay and professional concerning the quality issues, its authority in or control over academic issues, the strength of its own staff and its relationship with institutions, and the availability of and inclination of the SHEA to use state resources are key factors in channeling the state's effort in most states. The SHEA (or system board) will have its own focus on quality (definition, intended purposes, etc.) which may or may not reflect that of the other state actors. Its relationships with institutions also may be key in shaping both the type of quality effort and/or the approach to implementing it. This dynamic may also be critical in the institution's response to initiatives of the SHEA. There is already evidence that SHEAs rely on various types of quality improvement mechanisms. The breadth of types of state mechanisms and whether they apply selectively or broadly to most institutions, how they choose to involve institutions in designing these efforts, and the emphasis on different modes of implementation may all be critical in shaping institutional perceptions and responses to these efforts.

Institutional impacts. In an interactive political process, the state's policy and coordinating effort in quality improvement may be shaped by the institutions as well as have impact on them. Regardless of how the system functions, the primary measure of the efficacy of a state's quality

improvement emphasis and efforts is what happens in its institutions of higher education. The views of institutional officials and key groups on campuses who are targets of the improvement efforts are important ingredients both in understanding their awareness of the state's effort (a measure of impact), their attitudes towards it, and the roles they choose to play. Institutions can also vary in their response strategy--externally in the role they choose to play in the formulation of state policy on quality and in the state agency's effort to coordinate and implement it, and internally in how they encourage units to respond and participate. The real impacts on institutions, however, are reflected in the organizational changes that occur on each campus. Are they institutionwide or limited to target programs? Are they reflected in administrative as well as academic areas? Do they affect structure, process, or resource allocation? Do they penetrate to the level of academic units (departments and programs) and affect faculty and curricula? Are the changes intended or unintended? And ultimately, is there a qualitative improvement in the educational process and/or student learning and performance?

State system impacts. While systemwide or statewide impacts of quality improvement efforts may not be as critical as institutional changes (or the cumulative effects of them), there are numerous impacts that may reflect concerns and/or implicit purposes or expectations of state actors. Do quality improvement efforts affect access? costs of higher education? transfer patterns? the degree of competition and cooperation among higher education providers? And do they lead to a more responsive set of institutions to serving legitimate citizen and state needs?

SUMMARY

This preliminary framework has suggested some broad categories of actors and major arenas of activity which delineate the broad scope of state level quality improvement efforts (including their impacts). While incomplete, it suggests some broad dimensions and dynamics which could be the focus for data collection and sharing and which could serve the interests of policy analysts interested in the rapidly changing shape of this topic, of evaluative researchers interested in assessing the various types of quality improvement efforts, and of scholarly researchers interested in understanding how the quality improvement effort influences or has an impact on the performance of our higher educational institutions and systems.

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